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Planning for the convention like it's 2008

From cops to contractors, from protesters to GOP bigwigs, all are ramping up for the extravaganza that is still a year away.

By Randy Furst, Star Tribune

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Just one year from today, the Twin Cities will be bursting at the seams, awash in hoopla, overrun with celebrities and buzzing with a kind of excitement the region rarely sees.

The hotels will be jammed and partygoers will celebrate deep into the night; protesters will fill parks and parade down thoroughfares; television crews and news reporters from around the world will fan out by the thousands and make a perfect nuisance of themselves.

"Outside the Olympics, there's really nothing like this," St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said.

"This" is the 2008 Republican National Convention, to be held at St. Paul's Xcel Center Sept. 1-4, 2008.

Planning efforts are accelerating, and the level of activity at this early stage suggests that average Twin Citians have little notion of what they're in for.

Consider:

- A host of law enforcement agencies is designing the most complex security operation ever undertaken in Minnesota.
- Local peace groups are organizing, hoping to attract tens of thousands of demonstrators.
- The convention is expected to draw 5,000 delegates; 20,000 family members, supporters and guests; 15,000 members of the news media, and some 10,000 volunteers.
- Fifteen national Republican staffers have set up an office on the top floor of a downtown St. Paul office building. The staff will number 150 by next summer.
- Representatives from state delegations, Republican VIPs and corporate high rollers are visiting the Twin Cities, scouting out hotels and party sites.

Money matters

The Republican machinery to organize the extravaganza is spearheaded by Maria Cino, chief executive officer of the party's committee on arrangements, who said a Tennessee general contractor has been hired to oversee construction of the stage and other convention facilities at the Xcel.

That and other expenses are expected to total \$60 million, to be paid for with private money, raised by a Minneapolis-St. Paul host committee.

The committee is now on its third chairman since March -- Doug Leatherdale, a well-respected retired CEO.

Cino said the host committee in New York City, site of the 2004 Republican convention, also went through three chairmen.

"We haven't missed a beat," insists Jeff Larson, the interim second chairman, who said the committee as of mid-August had exceeded its fundraising goal of \$7.8 million.

Corporate dollars are key, and according to a brochure, a \$5 million contribution guarantees nine VIP seats at the Xcel Center, a private dinner and golf outing with GOP leaders, and a private reception with Gov. Tim Pawlenty, Sen. Norm Coleman and local mayors, plus other perks. There are also rewards for contributors who give less.

Others are seeking big bucks, too. Ryan Kelly, son of former St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly, and Joe Weber, brother of former Minnesota Congressman Vin Weber, work for separate companies, selling their services to businesses and associations that are hosting parties and otherwise trying to get the ear of influential Republicans.

Frank Marchionda, owner of I Nonni, said five groups of VIPs have toured his Italian restaurant in Lilydale as a possible party venue. "These people all come in limos," he said. "It's pretty exciting."

Locals hope to cash in

Some Twin Cities residents want to cash in, too. A half-dozen St. Paul entrepreneurs have put their homes up for rent during the convention, asking lofty rates on the website Craigslist.

Lee Schwanke, 42, an elementary art school teacher, is offering to rent his four-bedroom house on Marshall Avenue for \$35,000 for the week. "I haven't got any bites," said Schwanke, who said he wouldn't turn down \$20,000.

The city of St. Paul has a dozen committees tackling convention issues from beautification to licensing vendors. But its biggest efforts will be security.

John Kolenko, a U.S. Secret Service agent previously based in Los Angeles, is now in St. Paul coordinating convention security with the St. Paul Police Department and other agencies.

He co-chairs a steering committee that has 18 subcommittees covering such areas as civil disturbance, protection of dignitaries and intelligence.

St. Paul, like Denver, which hosts next year's Democratic Convention, is still waiting for its half of a \$100 million federal appropriation for security, which Congress has yet to approve. Much of it will be used to pay for what police earlier estimated will be about 3,000 officers on duty during the week, many hired from other jurisdictions.

Rich Stanek, Hennepin County sheriff, said that the coordination among various agencies "was incredible" following the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge and that it bodes well for the convention.

Protesters, many against the Iraq war, are expected to descend on the convention. Estimates vary from a few thousand to 100,000.

Marie Braun, a local antiwar leader, said protesters will get a tuneup on Sept. 15 when they will stage an antiwar march from the Cathedral of St. Paul to the Xcel Center and then to the State Capitol, a route protesters hope to use again on the opening day of the convention.

St. Paul police haven't issued permits for the opening day march because city ordinances bar permits more than 180 days before a demonstration. Lawyers for the Minnesota affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union say they might sue.

Besides a local anarchist group that is hinting at confrontational tactics, some civil disobedience protests are expected that could result in arrests.

In 2004, 1,800 protesters were arrested at the New York convention.

Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher previously said his department expects to handle incarcerations and is planning for as many as 3,000 arrests. St. Paul police said they hope for only a few.

"We are planning for a convention, not a catastrophe," said Doug Holtz, a spokesman for the St. Paul Police Department.

Erin Dady, director of convention planning for St. Paul, said the city is exploring the idea of identifying campgrounds for protesters.

Party-line collaboration

There has been some remarkable collaboration across party lines. Dady said the GOP's Cino has bonded with Mayor Coleman, a DFLer. They're both Catholics and she gave him a humorous book, "Growing Up Catholic."

Jeff Larson of the host committee worked with former Mayor Randy Kelly's reelection campaign in 2005, while Erin Dady was fundraising director for Chris Coleman, who unseated Kelly.

Working on the convention together, they've become friends. "It is a pleasant, ironic surprise," Dady said.

Another surprise is how far local officials will go to promote the convention.

Comedian Mo Rocca came here in July to tape a TV segment on the convention for Jay Leno's "Tonight Show." Rocca talked Mayor Coleman into joining him on a tandem bike with Coleman on the back, playing the bagpipes.

"There have been some embarrassing moments," Coleman said of his political career, "but that may well be the topper."

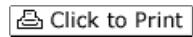
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